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RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON 8383  
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 3404  
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: THE BAHAMAS IS NEWEST PARTICIPANT IN CONTAINER  
SECURITY INITIATIVE

¶1. SUMMARY: After nearly a year of negotiations and last-minute jitters that nearly scuttled the deal, US and Bahamian customs officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the Container Security Initiative (CSI) in Nassau on Friday August 4. The MOU provides for technology and man-power to examine cargo and prevent shipments that might contain terrorist devices from entering the United States through the Freeport Container Port. The agreement is the latest in a line of cooperative arrangements demonstrating the strength of US-Bahamian cooperation against terror. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On August 4, Charge d'Affaires Brent Hardt and Bahamian Comptroller of Customs John Rolle signed an MOU on CSI. During the ceremony, each cited the outstanding partnership between The Bahamas and the United States on terrorism and security matters. Comptroller Rolle also touted the potential benefits of CSI to the struggling economy of Freeport. Through the MOU, DHS will provide x-ray equipment and staff to screen containers for weapons of mass destruction and other implements of terrorism at the Freeport Container Port. The port, which processes roughly 950,000 containers a year, was the 44th port to join the program.

¶3. Negotiations had been ongoing for nearly a year following the Prime Minister's expression of interest in the program to the Ambassador. Despite substantive agreement about the program, the Bahamian Cabinet had postponed approval pending clearance regarding the form of the MOU from the Attorney General. Post and DHS frustrations over delay led to imposition of a July 31 deadline. With significant pressure from the Ambassador and other Post efforts, a final signing was scheduled for August 4. Last-minute jitters regarding Bahamian costs under the MOU nearly scuttled the signing, which ultimately went forward as planned.

¶4. The signing received significant positive press, including coverage from the national news network and all three major newspapers. As stated in an editorial in the Nassau Guardian: "This initiative can only be good for all concerned: The Americans, the Bahamians and the people of all those countries of the world to which goods are directed through the Freeport Container Port. The safety of the port could also be an economic boon for The Bahamas as shippers worldwide will know of the pre-screening and will encourage clients to use it for its safety and the fact that goods are unlikely to be tampered with."

15. COMMENT: Though negotiations were lengthy, there was genuine interest from The Bahamas in the screening program. The slow pace in bringing CSI to conclusion was more reflective of an overburdened Attorney General than a lack of interest in security cooperation. The delays are also instructive about how Cabinet prioritizes its agenda -- overwhelmed by its involvement in the most minute details of government, it chooses to address items only when critically important to do so. END COMMENT.  
HARDT